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APRIL BURIAL

BY WINIFRED KIRKLAND

It is a gracious privilege when we may fold away the body of a loved one beneath the sod of spring; for the April bourgeoning eases our grief. The golden sun at the edges of the carriage curtain affirms a golden world beyond the black bar that for a few brief hours shuts us from life's sweet daylight. Above the stealthy, sable-clad movements that lower the casket, rings the love-call of a robin, and gay little winds, blown from some far shrine of tender mirth, scatter the grim words, "dust to dust," among the green branches. In April it is impossible to doubt the holiness of all seed-time. Privileged to stand by an open grave on some green and golden morning of the blossoming year, one is received into the communion of the trees, and in that moment knows beyond any peradventure that the loneliness to come is fraught with some mysterious fruitage. April is the month when it is easiest to believe the resurrection, and yet all of us whose lives have been dedicated to understanding the experience that we name loss, know that this April reassurance holds true for every day of the year. All grief that is deep enough has a generative power that constantly creates in us faculties mysteriously buoyant, and releases within us unguessed capacities of human comradeship.

We do not often enough examine those regions of our soul where it is always April, where for every man and woman who is alive, something new is always blossoming into being. We always hesitate to visit graves, fearing to find those seed-places still raw from the planting, and thus fail to discover them already green with unexpected promise. We do not observe how often spring is fulfilled within our life. We are heavy-witted with habit, and when once we have termed an experience hopeful or painful, lucky or sad, we do not perceive that since we labelled it, it has

changed its nature, and is actually producing fruits totally different from the name we give it. We bow above some spot where a hope lies buried, and do not note that already it has sprung up into beauty, and is filling our life with fragrance. In no experience are we stupider in our appraisal than in that commonest and saddest of all, for always we say of the death of loved ones,—mother, child, husband,—that we have lost them.

Not in those first broken and blinded months, but afterward, as the slow years round out to fulfillment, is it possible to retrace and review the long path of our loneliness. Wherein are we different men and women from what we might have been had they never been lent to us, our beautiful dead? Might it not be an April offering to stop for a little while and remember?

Was it a child who died? Which of the living daughters seems today so close to her mother as the little girl who is gone? Grown up and busy with their varied lives, it is not they, but the other, who comes to slip an arm through her mother's in the gloaming. A father, growing old, may read in his living son's eyes all the truth of his senility, but he knows that for the little lad who died at five he will always be a very prince of daddies. In the physical world love is always threatened with severance. We fear the many ways in which our children may draw apart from us, even while they are still close enough for our hands to touch. Sometimes we tremble with the apprehension, false or true, that our loved ones do not quite believe in us, but how clear of purpose and unafraid mothers and fathers walk who are conscious always of the unsullied baby confidence of the toddlers taken from them before they had grown old enough for any secret distrust. They always understand us, our children who are dead, and they have a strange earthly continuance, due to the fact that all our life is consecrated to their imagined approval, so that we ourselves give their personality a persistence that fate denied.

In analogous manner, a parent passed from us has sometimes a domination for good that cannot be overestimated. A dead mother sometimes absorbs into herself all the loveliness that we associate with that beautiful word, and out of a child's solitude and his hunger for an unknown presence is built a shrine of motherhood that is a secret refuge from all the cruelty of life. We all know men and women who

speaking with splendid pride and confidence of the mother they never saw.

The children who have lost fathers in this war enter upon a holy heritage. Some actual children whom we know through the battle memoirs of their fathers are typical of many others. Surely Thomas Kettle's "daughter Betty" will have a womanhood sacred to understanding the immortal sonnet from the field assuring her that

We fools, now with the foolish dead,
Died not for flag, nor King, nor Emperor,
But for a dream, born in a herdsman's shed,
And for the sacred Scripture of the poor.

Surely there will be for the little Vally, son of the brilliant young dramatist, Harold Chapin, no more precious reading than the letters his father wrote to him from the Front. May it not be that the home from which a father has gone to a soldier's death becomes a holy place, a school of heroism for any child? Unconsciously the household conduct will refer constantly to the desires, the standards, of the absent dead. Beautiful memories must haunt and hallow every room. All budding dreams, all growing ideals, will focus in a child's thoughts of the father. No boy ever yet forgot a father that died for freedom,—a living father he might sometimes forget or disregard,—a father lifted to the perspective of heroic sacrifice is a father to dominate every thought, every moment. The coming generation will follow without faltering where the fathers shall forever lead.

No mother's thoughts ever wander far from her dead child; no son is ever so preoccupied that he is not constantly referring his purposes to a dead father's sanction. Always a confident understanding exists between parents and children living and dead. But this clear comprehension is equally characteristic of all other forms of bereavement, for always we feel that we understand the dead better than the living, and always we are sure that our dead understand us. Two causes explain this revelation of spirit to spirit, this mysterious April flowering of the grave.

Grief alone gives us leisure to appreciate. Our dead are the only people we ever take time for. In our daily existence we are so hurried and harried by a hundred details, so duty-driven, that mere loving seems a form of self-indulgence. At heart we loved our lost ones too well for any great cruelty, any deep neglect, but the little things we did

not do haunt us piteously. Why did we think we were too busy for the tiny ways of tenderness?

A kiss would seem so simple,
So slight a thing a smile.

We never quite forgive ourselves that we did not speak

Such words as we deny them
Only because they live.

Not until they have passed beyond the hurly-burly of earth, do we have time to ponder their little peculiarities, their quaint whimsies and quirked phrases, which, so small, were yet significant of a spacious kindliness of soul. Our petty blindnesses, our petty unkindnesses, would break our hearts if we did not feel such vain regret disloyal to those who loved us as we loved them. They were once human, too; perhaps they, too, remember something they are sorry for. One of the keenest sensations of grief is that of their bright and blithe forgiveness. They seem to twinkle at us, and to smile and say, "What difference does all that nonsense make, now that we both understand?"

If all earth is sacred to planting, if every April is the symbol of a sacrament, perhaps loneliness itself is a seed ordained to an unguessed fruitage, not alone after our death, but here. Human comradeship would be an abortive growth if it were subject to the brevity of physical contact,—for its perfecting it sometimes needs to be supplemented by the leisured evaluation of grief. If we think with full honesty of those who have gone from us, do we not see how much better we know them now than before they went away? The years of separation have been a gift to us, revealing not merely the immensity of our bereavement, but revealing also, as time alone could do, the beatitude of our present possession.

Not only time, but also separation, affords us opportunity for surer sympathy. We can see souls more clearly when they are freed from the obscurations of the flesh, their flesh and ours. Only by means of removal are we able to look upon character cleansed of the immediate and lifted into the aspect of the eternal. We know that even earthly absence is sometimes salutary, the best restorative of exhausted intimacy. Despite affection, little tricks of gesture weary our eyes, obstinate little habits tease our nerves, until the soul they hide is wholly concealed by the blundering body. All these small impacts are forgotten at a distance, and spirit shines clear in our absent converse, and dominates

inalienably the harmony of return. Not alone the contact that is wearing threadbare is restored by periods of remoteness; the most concordant association needs sometimes the tonic of absence, by which two people, each setting forth alone, can make discoveries and win trophies to bring back for sharing.

The separations of life and the separations of death are alike curiously educative, not alone in new knowledge of those who leave us, but in new knowledge of ourselves. We did not realize how large a share those others had in shaping us. When they were here they seemed earth-bound and fallible like ourselves, but now we perceive with what high motive their every act was illumined, and we accord them the imitation that is one function of grief; when we make honest scrutiny of ourselves we find that there is no living person who exerts upon us such coercive influence as do our dead. It may be that we would not have heeded their advice so completely if it had been spoken, anxiously dinned into our ears perhaps; now, unvoiced, it has grown significant with deathless wisdom. Are we not often blind to this April blossom of bereavement, the mystical high communion to which our lives are set?

The full import of human intercourse is not yet declared to us, but the care with which comradeship is perfected, sometimes by association, sometimes by separation, should sting us to high surmise, as seeds in earth might tingle to the promise of spring.

Even in heaviest sorrow we use of our dead no harsher word than lost, in itself a term instinct with hope. We say that we have lost them, but not that they have lost anything, for no matter what creed we hold, we never picture them as sad. What is lost is not destroyed, does not part with its identity, and may at any time be restored to us. That despair is black indeed which has no expectation of reunion. We may utterly deny this hope even to ourselves, yet in the depth of each sorrowing soul there will be found a germinal *perhaps*. But strangely, stupidly, we postpone to some unknown future day this reunion with our loved ones. When we die we may rejoin them, we tell ourselves, as if the resurrection were a flower of sudden consummation, instead of being, like every other human hope, already begun in our earth-existence, and merely completed in the life beyond death. Already at this very hour and moment we possess

all the finest privileges of companionship. None of those qualities most valuable to human affection have we ever really lost. We do indeed miss many precious things sacred to earth and to the body; the twinkle in the eye, but what was that except as it expressed the quaint, merry spirit? the touch of the hand, but what was that except as it signified love? the swift thudding of little feet on the gravel, but did our ears really prize that sound except as it said the child was so glad to come home to us after school? Surely whatsoever things are loveliest in earthly intercourse we still possess inalienably: a mutual understanding, forever secure against estrangement, an hourly intimacy not subject to earthly distance, and best of all, the sharing of that aspiration which we lay bare to the soul of the dead, but hide from any nearer comrade, since, in our pitiful self-consciousness, we are afraid to tell any living being how hungry we are for God, how intensely we long just to be good. Of these priceless privileges of human comradeship no grave has ever robbed us, nor can ever rob.

It is life that can sever. Life has many ways of separating us, but death has only one, and that one is merely apparent and superficial. The disintegration of the grave is a slight thing compared with the corroding estrangements of life. There are living people whom we once loved who now are so far removed from us that it seems as if all eternity could not restore them. Sometimes the fault was in our gross misunderstanding of them, sometimes in theirs of us. We have seen friends once noble slowly subdued to decay through some selfish course, until while they still hold out their hands to our love we turn from them in despair. Much of earthly association, externally smooth, is inwardly hesitant and dogged with doubt. By contrast how holy and how honest is our communion with our dead! Both the friends here and the friends beyond our sight are graciously sent us for our strengthening and our joy, but so fallible are we all that only those passed from us are forever safe from all misunderstanding and all cruelty on their part or on ours. Because of this security they have become the warp and woof of our being. They are nearer than we know.

How close they seem to us sometimes, our dead! Sometimes we wake drowsily, feeling all the darkness palpitant with their presence. Perhaps they yearn to reach us through all the barricades of sense. It is disloyal to doubt that they

still love us as we love them. They, too, have learned to understand us better, as we them, since we were parted. Always, when we think of them we have a sense of happy intimacy. Invisible though they are, we are aware of serene eyes, of strong presences freed from the old handicap of pain. Sometimes they even seem to be laughing at us, beautiful laughter like the mirth of little April winds above a grave,—divine merriment of reassurance, as if they were trying to tell us that our feet were sundered from them merely that we might learn to knit step to theirs more blithely both here and hereafter. At times we shiver a little, remembering how dull we were to their beauty when they were with us of old, or conjecturing how earth-life with its myriad means of severance might have menaced this our present glad security. In these long years we have seen the flowering of the grave, we have tasted the fruitage of our loneliness. When we enter that existence that consummates earth, clear faces of love will smile in greeting, and some sweet amused voice will welcome, asking us, "Did you really think that you had lost me when in no other way could I have walked so close to you all this while?"

WINIFRED KIRKLAND.